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Delay in paying fair share suggests Avondale, LP not concerned about I-10 safety

Jim Cavanaugh

My Turn

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West of Loop 101, Interstate 10 is stymied by gridlock because there are not enough lanes. In the political process, accelerating the widening of I-10 also has dangerously come close to its own gridlock. The debate was shaped by three factors: policy, money and avoiding delay.

As the mayor of Goodyear, my priority was to widen I-10 without delay. The stretch through Goodyear has the highest fatality rate in the nation. The safekeeping of lives is more important than policy and money.

Some disagreed. Avondale and Litchfield Park were concerned about the finances. Goodyear partnered with them last year to pay the interest costs to move the widening forward four years, to 2007 from 2011. The three cities are not paying to build an interstate; they are paying only the cost to move the bond debt forward four years. State and federal dollars will build it.

This year, Litchfield Park and Avondale contended that the three-city resolution was only an "agreement to agree" that did not bind them to pay anything. But the I-10 acceleration would not have been approved by the Maricopa Association of Governments in 2006 without a showing that they intended to pay. MAG, made up of representatives from every city in Maricopa County, relied on this confirmation.

What changed? Money! This year, a new law was passed to allow reimbursement of interest costs up to \$10 million.

Full reimbursement bothered some cities. In the past, other cities had paid to accelerate freeway projects without reimbursement, so they believed our three cities should have to pay something. Also, there was concern that MAG's role in regional transportation planning would be jeopardized because cities now had an incentive to lobby the Legislature for their own projects.

Avondale and Litchfield Park were determined to get every dime. They said that they would not have signed the resolution without expecting a reimbursement. But when the cities initially sought MAG's approval for putting the project in the transportation plan in 2006, neither city mentioned that reimbursement was a condition for local funding. Then, during recent debate at MAG, they dug in their heels and refused to accept any amount less than \$10 million.

Full reimbursement passed initially, but when Phoenix called for a weighted vote, based on city population, the \$10 million failed. Phoenix felt strongly about its position and about Avondale's and Litchfield Park's refusal to compromise, and therefore opted for an extraordinary measure that has drawn rebuke from some concerned with the repercussions of taking such an extreme action.

Had the other West Valley cities, excepting Goodyear, not sided in rote step with Avondale in its uncompromising approach, a weighted vote would not have been necessary. East Valley cities and Phoenix had a reasonable argument; West Valley cities had a crusade.

It is clear that Avondale's and Litchfield Park's lack of receptiveness to a compromise put the entire project at risk of failure, as neither city intended to live by its resolution to pay for the acceleration without reimbursement. A compromise of \$6 million was reached. But Avondale and Litchfield Park did not support it.

Our City Council authorized the agreement to proceed. But Avondale and Litchfield Park were directed by their councils to negotiate for more. As MAG chairman, I called a special meeting. The majority in a 24-1 vote (Peoria dissented) supported \$7 million. From the remaining \$2.7 million, the cities would owe, over seven years, as follows: Goodyear, \$1.56 million; Avondale, \$1.03 million; and Litchfield Park, \$80,000. The 70 percent reduction from each cities' initial commitment is extraordinary.

Before a project can go out for bid, the State Transportation Board must approve. The next meeting is slated for Friday. During the negotiations, Avondale intended to approve the agreement before this meeting. But something has changed again.

Last Friday, Avondale and Litchfield Park told us that they want to renegotiate how the \$7 million is divided. They want a bigger share. Continued renegotiation will almost certainly delay the I-10 widening project. At an average of one accident per day, any delay is too long. I urge Avondale and Litchfield Park to stand by what they said they would do and pay their share. We have a road to build and people to safeguard. We cannot afford to delay a single day more.

Jim Cavanaugh is mayor of Goodyear and head of the Regional Council of the Maricopa Association of Governments. He can be reached at jcavanaugh@goodyearaz.gov.